

Common Sense Urban Design and Implementation Recommendations For the (Not Ready) Proposed Affordable Housing Overlay

The proposed Affordable Housing Overlay is the subject of much discussion and debate. Zoning reform cannot be simplified as a hard no or an unconditional yes. The devil is always in the details, and as a trained and experienced architect and urban designer I believe I am well-suited to address the concerns of the overlay, to guide an ordinance that realistically promotes affordable housing, and to prevent the city from being sued.

Every City Councillor is committed to addressing the affordable housing crisis. We all agree on the goal but disagree on the current citywide AHO overlay draft. My own view is that the present petition is deeply flawed and needs more work before it can be a viable solution. It lacks any meaningful design review standards and process, nor ways to measure outcomes. It does not specify the actual increased densities proposed for affordable housing.

Rather than a citywide scope as currently proposed, Cambridge should focus on the most buildable sites (where change is inevitable and the greater number of units can be built) that more fully meet the needs of affordable housing families. At the same time we must ensure that new construction enhances, not overwhelms, existing communities. A broader and sounder vision than the original overlay is needed, and this will require more work and more time as we find the most effective way to move forward.

Zoning is Law. We must remember that any approved zoning becomes our law. And any law must be carefully studied and thoughtfully developed. Because this has not yet happened, preliminary discussions have created a great sense of uncertainty, confusion and anger among our residents. We can – and must – do better.

City Development Policy Background: Since the 1970's, City policies focused almost exclusively on expanding commercial development in order to increase the tax base and employment opportunities, in part to make up for the loss of industry in the 1950's and 60's. As a result, the amount of commercial development in Cambridge continually outpaces new residential production. This planning approach creates a very strong housing demand from new employees with higher incomes who want to

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live near work and is compounded by unmet housing needs of expanding universities and the general increased interest in city living.

This has led to housing cost (apartment rents and home purchases) increasing 2,000 percent or more over the last 40 years. Many, especially the middle and working class, have been forced out of Cambridge.

Much concern has been generated by the recently proposed city overlay strategy, primarily because although it is well-intended, it is seriously incomplete and in some places, ill-informed and therefore, not ready for prime-time, public discussions. Advocates on one side do not want the AHO petition to change and members of the other side fear their homes will be overshadowed by new construction and their properties devalued. I strongly believe there is an urban design approach that helps everyone, but like anything worthwhile it will take time and more work to get it right.

A More Realistic, Broader Approach: Given the large amount of public financing and City Council/Staff involvement, any citywide petition resulting in denser construction must diligently balance community concerns with projected development. We need to do a better job of this. The expanse of the proposed petition is precedent-setting, and no one wins if the matter goes to court. The goal should be to find an approach that works for everyone in a fair, balanced, transparent, and productive way. Residents want the opportunity to be a part of the larger community and to live in homes that fit into their neighborhood.

A Different Kind of Zoning is Needed: We must go beyond specific site zoning as outlined in the Affordable Housing Overlay petition and consider existing neighboring buildings' context, including siting characteristics (setbacks, height, character, etc.) in order to create desirable development. Each neighborhood block is different, especially in commercial areas,. We must evaluate appropriate sites from a neighborhood-impact perspective and develop more appropriate heights and transitions.

We need to zone and build in context. Well-conceived architectural and urban design objectives *with a strong design review process* are essential to ensure that new development (especially those significantly larger than their neighbors) reinforces and enhances the surrounding neighborhood, village center, or city square character. The current plan as written does not allow for this. Ideally, the best overlay ordinance

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creates a scenario where each project within it adds to the civic confidence that the ordinance works.

Preferred Site Locations: We should highly focus on site opportunities where urban change is already inevitable and ensure that they are part of the greater area vision. Whenever there is development demand, change almost always occurs on "Soft Parcels." These are sites that are underbuilt (where existing zoning allows a larger structure), underutilized (vacant or unprofitable use), and/or one in poor condition (beyond saving).

In Cambridge, parking lots and one-story (especially vacant) structures are the most prime locations for redevelopment. We see this happening right now throughout the city. These are the areas that will almost certainly become luxury apartment if we don't prioritize affordable housing there.

Furthermore, most people, especially residents without cars, want to live near needed retail, public services, and mass transit. Many want to have the opportunity to be a part of an active community.

Overlay Design Consultation Objectives: Design objectives, which determine the design and scope of any development, must be part of the zoning if they are going to have any consistent impact on development. Separate guidelines, especially without a special permit-based design review process, (as proposed by the current petition), are ineffective because they are not enforceable.

Implementation and Oversight: As now proposed, The Cambridge Affordable Housing Trust, the principal Cambridge funding source, seems to be the only design and implementation oversight group currently with any power. They will be required to evaluate neighborhood design concerns, Planning Board design recommendations, and Community Development's urban design staff comments and then decide whether the proposed building should be funded or not. They must state what design changes will be incorporated in any proposed project seeking their funding assistance. No other group would have any control. This is overly taxing on the Trust and not a good balance of power.

Site and Non-Residential Space Ownership: Instead, the city needs to utilize a trusted non-profit entity with proven experience in the development process and the ability to purchase property and possibly write down the land cost for public

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purposes. This entity would be in a position to oversee any non-residential first floor uses, such as desired local retail, pre-kindergarten facilities, neighborhood library, etc. The remanding building rights would be sold to a local affordable housing developer - allowing the residential developer to focus primarily on the development of housing.

In my view, the most likely candidate is the Cambridge Redevelopment Authority, which has a unique economic and development management position in the city with broad purchasing and planning powers. This approach is essential to expanding affordable housing in Cambridge.

Embellishment of Public Domain: The city, not the affordable housing developer, should be responsible for new sidewalks, trees sustainably planted and watered, street patching, streetlights, and utilities below grade to help offset public domain costs and, at the same time, improve street tree growth as well. The city is not currently responsible and this needs to be added to an improved overlay petition.

More Funding: I fervently hope the City Council can eventually pass an Affordable Housing Overlay that promotes affordability, addresses neighborhood concerns and doesn't open the city up to lawsuits. However, even a successful overlay will go nowhere without funding for affordable housing. I am proud of my work to secure an additional \$5 million a year in city funding for affordable housing, but this is clearly not enough. Others on the council and in the city are doing their best to increase funding, and we still need to do better. Although Cambridge is by far the wealthiest city in the state with the greatest financial resources, our residents have the second lowest real estate tax payments in Massachusetts¹ and one of the lowest in the country. As many residents have stated, we can easily afford more for meeting our commitments.

Bottom-Line Recommendation: I have proposed a number of specific improvements to the petition that will be discussed at today's Ordinance hearing. However, it is clear to me that we are not ready, with too little time available, to fully modify the petition. Let's truly understand all implications, both positive and negative. Let's get it right, and take the time we need to work on the intended goals and methods to assure that what we propose is feasible, equitable, transparent, measurable, and unifies us as a great City.

¹ We pay two-thirds of what Boston residents pay in real estate taxes.